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Bach Mai Hospital Hit Earlier

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The Bach Mai hospital in Hanoi, whose reported destruction by American bombs last month has provided a focal point for international criticism of Nixon administration Vietnam policy, was also hit and damaged during an air raid last summer.

According to unpublished testimony before a Senate subcommittee last September, the Pentagon photographed the hospital on a reconnaissance mission June 30 and brought back evidence of a large bomb crater in the hospital courtyard.

Several American visitors to Hanoi during the summer, including former Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark and John A. Sullivan, associate executive secretary of the American Friends Service Committee, were taken to the hospital and shown extensive damage to part of the structure.

20-Foot-Deep Crater

From photographs taken at the hospital July 17 by Sullivan, it is clear that a wing of the hospital was badly damaged below the roof line, apparently from the blast of the bomb that caused the crater.

Another of Sullivan's photographs shows a water-filled crater at least 20 feet in diameter. Hospital officials claim the bomb fell there early on the morning of June 27.

Another bomb fell outside the hospital about 100 yards away, according to Clark's recollection of North Vietnamese claims, and Sullivan has testified that a rocket was fired also. North Vietnamese officials claimed that two members of the Bach Mai staff were killed in the June bombing.

Last month's bombing of the hospital was grudgingly admitted by the Pentagon early this month by Jerry W. Friedheim, the Defense Department spokesman, acknowledged "some limited accidental damage" at "a hospital the enemy calls Bach Mai" during his regular news briefing January 2.

Pentagon Fully Aware

During the previous week, when eyewitness accounts of the latest bomb damage to the hospital, reinforced by photographs, were worldwide front page news, Friedheim had on at least two occasions denied the hospital had been hit and on one occasion suggested that there was no such place.

It is plain, however, that the Pentagon had been fully aware of Bach Mai hospital's existence for six months, at least. The June 27 damage to the hospital was specified by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's Refugee subcommittee in its attempt last summer to draw information from the Pentagon about civilian casualties in North Vietnam.

According to information in subcommittee records, the department admitted that the hospital was photographed June 30 — three days after the reported raid. The crater later photographed by Sullivan at ground level apparently showed up on the Air Force reconnaissance picture, but the damage to the hospital's wing did not.

This discrepancy is plausible, however. Sullivan's photograph showing the damaged wing also shows an intact roof line. Conceivably, the wrecked masonry in his picture would not have shown up in a reconnaissance photograph taken from many thousands of feet overhead.

Sullivan and Clark both discount the possibility that the damage they saw last summer is the same damage Hanoi officials displayed to visiting Americans and to western and neutral diplomats last month.

From still photographs and motion pictures of the hospital which have been widely distributed in recent weeks, Sullivan said in an interview, "it is clear the hospital was badly damaged since I saw it in July."

Clark, who visited the hospital twice during the first week of August, has compared notes with two recent American visitors to Hanoi: Telford Taylor, the former chief prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, and Yale chaplain Michael Allen.

"There's just no comparison," Clark said. "It was a functioning hospital when I went out there," he recalled.

"But the way Taylor described it, it is now 'totally demolished' — with 'nothing salvageable,'" Clark said.

Even in July, Sullivan recalls, within three weeks of the summer bombing, the hospital was functioning.

Clark, who visited Bach Mai alone a few days after his conducted tour there under the watchful eyes of North Vietnamese officials, recalls that some 600 beds of the hospital's 930 to 1,200 bed capacity were in use.

The damaged wing contained storage and office facilities and not more than half allocated to hospital beds, he said.

Although raids were in full swing last summer over Hanoi, hospital authorities were only beginning to move beds into underground shelters when Clark visited Bach Mai in early August. Clark remembers several hundred beds jammed side by side in underground tunnels when he explored the hospital on his second visit there.

Longtime Landmark

The hospital is close to three military targets that have loomed large on Pentagon damage lists: a petroleum storage area a few hundred yards to the west and an airfield and military command facility a few hundred yards to the south.

The hospital, North Vietnam's largest, dates back to French colonial times, and it fronts on the main road and railroad line to the south.

Located some 3½ miles from the center of downtown Hanoi, it is a prominent landmark on most detailed maps of the city and has been for nearly 40 years. A 1936 map of the city, for instance, shows the hospital as a large group of buildings on the southern edge of the city, designated as the "Rene Robin Hospital."

See Ripley, NYTimes,
Getler and Valentine,
Wx Post, 3 Jan 73.